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After Fire: A Biography of Clifton Pugh

Posted: 04 Oct 2010 | **By:** [Patricia Anderson - Editor](#)

Clifton Pugh did not disappear into the undergrowth, but on either side of the canyon between the abstractionists of the Sydney scene in the 1950s and 60s and the aggressively narrative painters of Melbourne of the same period, Pugh does seem to have gone missing for years on end. Sally Morrison's biography - nine years in the writing - should put him in the clearing once and for all.

His work was more sophisticated, more cerebral and more finely crafted than many of his peers who have ascended the auction room ladder, so it seems completely timely that a heartfelt, finely tuned and exhaustively researched biography by novelist and scientist Sally Morrison should make its appearance now. Morrison had attracted the attention of Patrick White years earlier with her novel *Who's Taking You to the Dance?* and in 1995 she won the National Book Council's Banjo Award with *Mad Meg*.

Both books exhibit a degree of psychological penetration, which makes her biography of Pugh compelling reading. Morrison became friends with Pugh in his later years; and when he died in 1990, she waited ten years before undertaking a detailed and frank account of his life. Pugh, however, does not appear to be a particularly likeable character.

Clifton Pugh, In the Wake of Fear

His painting is more approachable. Pugh was, in fact, one of the few artists to attract the attention of Clement Greenberg, the celebrated New York art critic and champion of abstraction. When he visited Australia in 1968, local painters and critics were taken aback when he admired painters like Clifton Pugh and Sam Fullbrook: "[Clifton] Pugh, potentially wrestling with the visionary, is a talent I admire", he suggested. On the other hand, local critic Robert Hughes damned with faint praise, suggesting that Pugh's meticulously rendered paintings of dry bush grasses, trees and flowers - "stylised, half abstracted forms" - were mannered and mincing. Lots of words could be used to describe Pugh's art - and the man himself for that matter - 'mincing' is not one of them.

Morrison's book opens with a visceral description of the approach to 'Dunmoochin' the lamely named house (and its grounds) that Pugh established. How would Pugh want to be remembered? muses Morrison. "Bush painter, portraitist, politician, conservationist, heavy drinker, womaniser", all these were aspects but "who was he at heart, I wonder?" These are brave and candid words for a biographer. Pugh's mother was the daughter of Ernest Cooke, a brilliant mathematician and astronomer. As Morrison puts it: "The Cookes were the cream on Adelaide's social sponge", and one can sense immediately why Patrick White admired her writing. She was also something of a painter, as was Pugh's father, who had returned to his job a chief engineer in the Victorian Railways after his years with the AIF in France and settled down to family life. This life was occasionally strained. Clifton, born in 1924, was the third of their three boys. Violet had hoped for a girl but, as Morrison puts it: "son number three ... meant that [Violet] was stuck in the middle of a family maypole from which emotions hung and knotted themselves in clumps of clashing colours". This is the kind of writing which makes this biography hard to put down. And another observation quickly follows. Clif, a toddler, is in his pram with a nursemaid. He drops his bottle. They went back, "hunting for it while Clif threw the tantrum of a young man in the earliest phase of a lifelong love affair with bottles".

In the final count, Morrison's achievement is not just a forensic examination of one of Australia's most colourful and combative artists, it is a social history of Melbourne: its post-World War I years, its demoralising depression, its political communities, and its eccentric city and bush dwelling art communities.

Image: Clifton Pugh, *In the Wake of Fear*, 1959, oil on hardboard, 68 x 91cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia. Courtesy Dunmoochin Foundation.



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